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Captain Swing: A Retrospect

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SUMMARY: *Captain Swing*, authored by Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé and published in 1969, was one of the key texts in the development of the new British social history of the 1960s and 1970s. On its fortieth anniversary, this introduction to the special theme looks back at the significance and impact that *Captain Swing* had, and continues to have, on the study of popular protest. The author locates the approach taken by its writers within the political and historiographical context of its time and examines how successive historians – including the two authors following this retrospect – have built upon and challenged the arguments which the book advanced.

In 1969, the publishing firm Lawrence and Wishart published a 380-page monograph on the extensive riots of English agricultural labourers in 1830. *Captain Swing*, authored by Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, received immediate critical acclaim. Unusually for such a study, it was taken up a year later by a book club, the Readers' Union, and a new edition published. Together with Edward Thompson's monumental *The Making of the English Working Class*, published six years earlier, likewise to critical and commercial success, *Captain Swing* firmly placed the new "history from below", pioneered by Rudé, Thompson, and an associated group of Marxist historians, before an eager and widening audience. Indeed, it may reasonably be argued that these two volumes, with their radical reinterpretation of the study of social history, popular protest and popular culture, had a seismic impact, an impact which continues to have remarkable reverberations today.

One of the reasons for this immediate impact lay in the political context of the time. Radicalism and liberalism were in the ascendant, characterized by a new insistence upon and attention to the rights and experiences of individuals, while the old certainties of capitalist enterprise and conservative politics were coming under increasing challenge. Colonialism was collapsing and capitalist expansion, or "development", was challenging social structures not only in the West but also in what was then referred to as the "Third World". The new social history eagerly engaged with this backcloth, seeing both theoretical challenge and practical

significance in the work of rescuing the people's history.¹ In the preface to the paperback edition of *The Making* in 1968, Thompson noted:

In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights in social evils which we have yet to cure. Moreover, the greater part of the world today is undergoing problems of industrialisation, and the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.²

Captain Swing was less explicit about implications of the rediscovered past of the English rural labourers for the present, but no-one reading the book was left in any doubt that the Swing rioters were "primitive rebels"³ facing an increasingly aggressive capitalist expropriation of their rights and customary expectations in much the same ways as the rural rebels of the postwar world.

Hobsbawm and Rudé were quick to acknowledge the earlier work on Swing by the Fabian historians, John and Barbara Hammond, in their study, *The Village Labourer*, first published in 1911.⁴ This was, they noted, "one of the most distinguished products of the only era of British history until the present which took a really serious interest in the farm workers".⁵ The Hammonds had provided a narrative account of the "last labourers' revolt", but, while recognizing their "profound sympathy" for their subjects and the "fairly systematic" use they had made of Home Office papers, Hobsbawm and Rudé argued that their predecessors had over-simplified their account of social change, assumed too readily the impact of first enclosure and then Speenhamland upon the labourers' conditions, and significantly underestimated "the extent of the movement" in 1830. New evidence, now available in the new county record offices, alone justified a revision. However, as important, Hobsbawm and Rudé argued,

[...] we are now able to ask new *questions* about [the riots]: about their causes and motives, about their mode of social and political behaviour, the social composition of those who took part in them, their significance and their consequences [...]. The task of this book is therefore the difficult one, which nowadays – and rightly – tempts many social historians, of reconstructing the

1. For the group of Marxist historians who shaped the concept of "history from below", see F. Krantz (ed.), *History From Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology* (Montreal [etc.], 1985), and H.J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Oxford, 1984).

2. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963, 1968 edn), p. 13.

3. E.J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969), p. 249. The term came from Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Manchester, 1959).

4. J.L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (London, 1911).

5. Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 13.

mental world of an anonymous and undocumented body of people in order to understand their movements, themselves only sketchily documented.⁶

Captain Swing was a joint project of two self-avowedly Marxist historians, but it was nonetheless built from two somewhat different approaches. Hobsbawm's earlier work, mainly concentrated on the labour history of later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was steeped in the well-established Marxist interpretation of economic and social history which saw the years from the later eighteenth century as marking an industrial revolution which had transformed economic, and thence social and political, relations into a more clearly class-divided form. The displacement of a peasantry and the degradation of agricultural labourers formed part of that narrative. This was a story which Hobsbawm redeveloped in *Captain Swing*, being "mainly responsible" for the introduction and for the following chapters which set out the background to the disturbances. But Hobsbawm also brought to the piece an awareness of wider historical contextual parallels. His earlier work on Luddism alerted him to the fact that Swing was in fact a far more extensive episode of machine-breaking than the earlier eponymous outbreaks in the Midlands and the north of England, while his European interest in social bandits enabled him to display a sensitive ear to the languages and forms of social protest which went beyond outright confrontation.⁷

If Hobsbawm's chapters provided a solid and familiar bedrock, the novelty of *Captain Swing* lay in the chapters contributed by George Rudé. Rudé had already established his reputation as a leading scholar on eighteenth-century disorder. Beginning as a follower of the great historian of the French Revolution, Georges Lefebvre, Rudé had developed an interest in the revolutionary crowd, not merely as agency but as an aggregation of individuals. His concern to distinguish "the faces in the crowd", to understand the motives and actions of the individual actors as well as those of the entire cast, had led to a succession of specific studies, best articulated in the book, *The Crowd in History*, published in 1964.⁸

The fruits of this approach were seen in Rudé's contribution to *Captain Swing*, combining his method of careful historical reconstruction of events with detailed examination of the participants. Thus, he provided not only the narrative chapters explaining the overall course of the riots across southern England but also a section entitled "The Anatomy of

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 12.

7. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London, 1964), ch. 2, "The Machine Breakers".

8. G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York, 1964). The approach had been developed in *idem*, "The Gordon Riots: a Study of the Rioters and their Victims", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1956), pp. 93-114; in *idem*, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1962); and in *idem*, *Wilkes and Liberty* (Oxford, 1962).

Swing", with chapters which dealt in turn with the pattern of revolt, the victims, the rioters and their supporters, and another section examining "Repression and Aftermath". His hand was also very apparent in three of the four appendices, one detailing by county the forms and distribution of riots, the second summarizing the toll exacted by repression, and the third setting out a "table of incidents" which attempted a comprehensive listing and classification of all Swing events in the period between February 1830 and October 1831.⁹

The authors of *Captain Swing* were clear that the rural rioters of 1830 were no longer peasants: "The typical English agriculturalist was a hired man, a rural proletarian".¹⁰ Dispossessed of his land, the labourer was dependant upon paid work for the larger and increasingly dominant capitalist farmers. That dependence grew as the rural population increased, alternative work in the putting-out industries disappeared, and as the provision of poor relief became ever more meagre and grudging. Payment by the piece and the casualization of employment produced a rural reserve army of labour. There were, the authors admitted, some left in the countryside who still might be seen as peasantry: "small rural tradesmen", and rapidly disappearing ranks of small owner-occupiers. However, the relentless pressure of pauperization was reducing rural society into two groups: "socially speaking the marginal members of the rural lower-middle class were assimilated to the rest of the 'lower orders' and distinguished from the farmers".¹¹ Indeed, evidence of the faces in the crowd frequently revealed the presence of small farmers and tradesmen in the rioters' ranks, often in leading roles. The last labourers' revolt proved to be rather more socially diverse than the Hammonds had supposed.

However, this increasingly polarized society had not led to the development of a new political or class-consciousness. Hobsbawm and Rudé, somewhat ruefully, noted: "[n]or are there many signs of a new political or social ideology". While the authorities frequently suspected the hand of radical agitators, while there were "known centres of radicalism in the heart of the disaffected counties", and while "there were [...] Radical craftsmen, tradesmen and small holders among those arrested for participation in the riots", the links to radicalism were tenuous. At best they could only suggest "that the labourers movement was touched [...] by Radical agitation" in some places.¹²

If politics did not inform protest, nor did a clear sense of class exploitation: "On the contrary, there is evidence that the labourers still

9. The table also listed one solitary event from August 1832; Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 358.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 217–219.

accepted the ancient symbols of ancient ideals of stable hierarchy.” Indeed, while the issues of wages, threshing machines, and the tithe informed many protests, they argued, “there was a wider objective: the defence of the customary rights of the rural poor as freeborn Englishmen, and the restoration of the stable social order which had – at least it seemed so in retrospect – guaranteed them”.¹³ In drawing attention to this “past against the future”¹⁴ aspect of Swing, Hobsbawm and Rudé were pre-empting Edward Thompson’s later, more discursive, delineation of the “moral economy of the poor”.¹⁵ Just as the eighteenth-century food rioters depicted by Thompson had articulated a strong sense of right in their insistence upon the “just price” and the imperative that the justices must maintain the balance between market power and consumer, Swing rioters often emphasized that “Their demands were just: they must be lawful. The King himself must have authorised them.” This belief was reciprocated in the “surprising support” which some employers and rulers gave “to the Luddism of the poor”.¹⁶

Captain Swing aimed to be a comprehensive study of the disorders. Accounts of the riots in the south east and central south-west, well covered in the Hammonds’ work, were extended but *Captain Swing*, also drew greater attention to the spread of the riots into East Anglia, the Midlands, and the North, though in the last two cases only sketchily. But it was the detailed appendices which emphasized the spread and extent of the disorders and their hitherto unrecognized intensity in the heartlands of revolt. From these data, Hobsbawm and Rudé were able to conclude that Kent topped the league for arson, Hampshire for Swing letters and “robbery”, while Wiltshire witnessed the most machines broken, followed by Berkshire. In all they noted 1,475 separate Swing “events”. Incidents of machine-breaking, “the core of the whole Swing movement”,¹⁷ accounted for 390 of these, arson (the next largest) 316, and Swing letters, 99. They were also thereby able to identify the typical rioters as “generally young men or men of early-middle years: it was comparatively rare to find boys or old men among them”.¹⁸ Most were “respectable”, deserving of the good reputations provided at the trials and, echoing Rudé’s earlier work on the Gordon rioters, relatively few had criminal records.¹⁹

13. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

14. *Ibid.*

15. E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century”, *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76–136.

16. Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 18, 17.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

18. *Ibid.*, Appendix 1; p. 247; Rudé, “The Gordon Riots”.

19. Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 249.

The final section of the book detailed the process and impact of repression. Hobsbawm and Rudé were in no doubt that the state had gone out of its way to exact a heavy revenge with 19 executions and 481 transported to Australia. "From no other protest movement of the kind – from neither Luddism nor Chartism nor trade unionism – was such a bitter price exacted."²⁰ Revolt gave way to "embittered despair" and incendiarism, "the characteristic form of rural unrest after 1830", but still no clear sense of class-consciousness emerged.²¹ Nonetheless, the Swing rioters, they argued, were not left entirely empty handed by the disturbances. "The threshing machines did not return on the old scale. Of all the machine breaking movements of the 19th century that of the helpless and unorganised farm labourers proved to be the most effective. The real name of King Ludd was Swing".²²

In the forty years since *Captain Swing's* appearance, a succession of historians has sought to extend or to question the arguments which the book advanced. One of the earliest so to do was Andrew Charlesworth, who brought to the topic the tools and approaches of the historical geographer. Asking how the riots spread, Charlesworth mapped the pattern of Swing disorders. These maps led him to question Hobsbawm and Rudé's view that riots were "essentially a *rural* and a local phenomenon", with the "path of the rising" following local routes, and ignoring "the main arteries of national or even county circulation".²³ Charlesworth's reconstruction of the data from the appendices suggested that major routes might well have played a larger part, and he argued that this indicated the strong possibility that local radicals, mainly craftsmen living and working in the small towns and villages along the main roads, had played an important role in the dissemination of revolt.²⁴ Likewise, the later work of Ian Dyke on the rural impact of William Cobbett and of Roger Wells on the radical penetration of Kent and Sussex in these years has continued to suggest that Hobsbawm and Rudé may have underestimated the role of local radicals.²⁵

Hobsbawm and Rudé's delineation of rural labouring society as "proletarian" has likewise come under scrutiny, if indirectly, in the work of Jeannette Neeson and of Mick Reed who each have pointed to the

20. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 285, 284.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 190.

24. A. Charlesworth, *Social Protest in a Rural Society: The Spatial Diffusion of the Swing Disturbances 1830–31* (Norwich, 1979).

25. I. Dyke, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1992); R. Wells, "Mr Cobbett, Captain Swing and King William IV", *Agricultural History Review*, 45 (1997), pp. 34–48. See also D. Kent, *Popular Radicalism and the Swing Riots in Central Hampshire* (Winchester, 1997).

continuing presence in the rural world of small holding “peasants” and to the economy of “makeshifts”.²⁶ Indeed, the complexities of nineteenth-century rural society are still being unravelled. Likewise, Hobsbawm and Rudé’s depiction of a society, deeply steeped in notions of customary rights, has been critically examined by Bushaway, who has shown that, far from these attitudes being eradicated in the wake of the rising, “customary society” had a real purchase upon the rural world late into the century.²⁷ Roger Wells’s extensive researches have demonstrated a moral economic model having a lengthy continuum from the eighteenth into the nineteenth centuries and up to 1830, while Randall and Newman have questioned Hobsbawm and Rudé’s assumption that the repression of Swing marked a clear abandonment of old paternalist attitudes by the landed.²⁸

Moreover, the authors’ confidence that *Captain Swing* had identified all protests has been shown to be misplaced. In fact, those following in their footsteps soon found that the list was far from definitive and many more Swing “events” have been unearthed. Carl Griffin’s extensive studies of Kent, apparently one of *Captain Swing*’s most closely researched counties, revealed many incidents missed by Hobsbawm and Rudé,²⁹ while the quantifying spirit has been driven forwards by the work of the Family and Community Historical Research Society (FACHRS) who have demonstrated that *Captain Swing* seriously underestimated both the volume and extent of the disorders.³⁰ Where Hobsbawm and Rudé identified 1475 Swing “events”, the combined efforts of local historians across the country working on the project succeeded in identifying no fewer than 3,283 incidents. According to FACHRS, there were 539 recorded incidents of threshing machine breaking, not the 390 listed by Hobsbawm and Rudé. In the case of arson, they raised the number of identified

26. J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (Cambridge, 1993); M. Reed, “The Peasantry in Nineteenth-Century England: A Neglected Class?”, *History Workshop*, 18 (1984), pp. 53–76; and *idem*, “Nineteenth-Century Rural England: A Case for ‘Peasant Studies’”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 14 (1986), pp. 78–99.

27. R.W. Bushaway, *By Rite* (London, 1982).

28. R. Wells, “The Moral Economy of the English Countryside” in A.J. Randall and A. Charlesworth (eds), *Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 209–271; A.J. Randall and E. Newman, “Protest, Proletarians and Paternalists: Social Conflict in Rural Wiltshire, 1830–1850”, *Rural History*, 6 (1995), pp. 205–227. See also P. Jones, “Swing, Speenhamland and Rural Social Relations: The ‘Moral Economy’ of the English Crowd in the Nineteenth Century”, *Social History*, 32 (2007), pp. 272–291.

29. C. Griffin, “‘There Was No Law to Punish That Offence’: Re-Assessing ‘Captain Swing’: Rural Luddism and Rebellion in East Kent, 1830–31”, *Southern History*, 22 (2000), pp. 131–163.

30. M. Holland (ed.), *Swing Unmasked: The Agricultural Riots of 1830 to 1832 and their Wider Implications*, together with an accompanying CD-Rom (Milton Keynes, 2005); Family and Community Historical Research Society (<http://www.fachrs.com>).

incidents from 316 to 1,292, while Swing letters rise from 99 to 272, incidents of robbery from 219 to 252, and wage riots from 162 to 284. And, while the essential geography of the heartland of protest identified by Hobsbawm and Rudé has been confirmed, work since their book – by Eric Richards³¹ and by FACHRS, among others – has widened our geographical frame of reference and stretched the timeframe of the disorders.

The FACHRS project suggests that the quantifying approach of Captain Swing remains ascendant. Indeed, we can see this model clearly informing the work of Charles Tilly and his followers.³² However, such an approach brings with it assumptions which might obscure as well as reveal. Roger Wells, in an early challenge to the “quantifying” spirit, had warned historians of the dangers in seeking to draw meaning from the quantification of riot since the sources were deficient, deliberately so in many cases.³³ Moreover, categorizing “events” into one typology – “machine-breaking”, “wage meeting”, or “robbery” – risks missing the importance of a changing context as incidents developed. Many Swing actions began peacefully enough but changed character as farmers resisted, as different groups joined in, or as drink, levied or freely given, took hold. The composition of a Swing “mob” might change only a little in the course of a day’s “mobbing”, their “mental world” staying the same, but their mood and actions shifting according to events. Quantification brings a clearer sense of dimension but carries with it the risk of compartmentalization.³⁴

One response to the perceived problems of bundling events across different geographies and times has been to shift the focus away from the macro-study towards the micro-study. Again it was Roger Wells who pioneered this approach in terms of rural protest,³⁵ but it has been taken up with enthusiasm by a new generation of historians such as Steve Poole,

31. E. Richards, “Captain Swing in the West Midlands”, *International Review of Social History*, 19 (1974), pp. 86–99.

32. C. Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); J. Bohstedt, “Gender, Household and Community Politics: Women in English Riots, 1790–1810”, *Past and Present*, 120 (1988), pp. 88–122; and *idem*, “The Pragmatic Economy, the Politics of Provision and the ‘Invention’ of the Food Riot Tradition in 1740”, in Randall and Charlesworth, *Moral Economy and Popular Protest*, pp. 55–92.

33. R. Wells, “Counting Riots in Eighteenth-Century England”, *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 37 (1978), pp. 68–72. See also C. Griffin, “Knowable Geographies? The Reporting of Incendiarism in the Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century English Provincial Press”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 32 (2006), pp. 38–56.

34. For a criticism of the effect of aggregating riotous events into one or other category in the case of food riots, see A. Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 104, 223–225.

35. R. Wells, “Crime and Protest in a Country Parish: Burwash 1790–1850”, in J. Rule and R. Wells, *Crime, Protest and Popular Politics in Southern England 1740–1850* (London, 1997), pp. 169–236.

Carl Griffin, and Peter Jones, who have thereby revealed the complexities and very real differences which underlie what might otherwise seem very similar events.³⁶ Even local agrarian economies often differed considerably from village to village, while the rural world occasionally overlapped into other, rather different, economies, as in the case of some Kentish and Sussex villages where smuggling gangs lived cheek by jowl with their labouring neighbours. The two excellent articles, by Carl Griffin and Peter Jones, which follow have their roots in a scepticism of the old model established by *Captain Swing*. Close attention to the local is clearly essential if we are to really understand the social politics, normally hidden from the historian's sight, which was worked out in high relief only when riot or protest erupted.

Yet, if flaws in their study are now widely recognized, if old models of examining social protest are coming under criticism, if new approaches to understanding popular protest are being developed, the essential questions posed by Hobsbawm and Rudé at the start of *Captain Swing* remain as important as ever: what caused the disorders, how did they spread, what do they show of the changing character of rural society? *Captain Swing* remains a seminal publication and any new study of the riots still, perforce, begins with an acknowledgment of the debt owed to the book. After forty years, that remains a real achievement.

36. See, as exemplars, S. Poole, "'A Lasting and Salutory Warning': Incendiarism, Rural Order and England's Last Scene of Crime Execution", *Rural History*, 19 (2008), pp. 163–177; Griffin, "'There Was No Law to Punish That Offence'"; Jones, "Swing, Spennhamland and Rural Social Relations".